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ABSTRACT

Considerable attention has been given to organizational effectiveness of public sector organizations at all levels: local, state, and federal. Public education has not escaped scrutiny. Current examinations of the effectiveness, efficiency, and quality of education are more intense than that of other public sector organizations. The organizational effectiveness of rural small school districts has been of particular interest. Rural schools have long been regarded as inferior to their counterparts in other settings, and in fact, rural districts have felt the pressures of new, potentially damaging demands on programs and services caused by declining enrollments, state reform initiatives, and depressed economic conditions. Although organizational effectiveness is a popular topic, no meaningful definition of the topic, nor of effectiveness exists. The design of the organizational effectiveness study described in this paper is based on these points: (1) there cannot, at this time, be one universal model of organizational effectiveness because there is not a universal theory of organizations; and (2) it is more worthwhile to develop frameworks for assessing effectiveness than to try to develop theories. This design for assessing the organizational effectiveness of rural, small school districts consists of five major, mostly sequential, steps: (1) considering major policy and technical issues; (2) agreeing on how to think about the organization's various subsystems; (3) agreeing on what constitutes measures of quality; (4) agreeing on the translation of measures of quality into standards; and (5) establishing the presence or absence of a standard. Various steps are illustrated with tables. (ALL)

DESIGNING ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS STUDIES OF RURAL AND SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

by

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In recent years, policy makers as well as researchers and practioners have devoted considerable attention to the question of organizational effectiveness of public sector organizations at all levels: local, state, and federal. The popularity of the topic in the policy communities can be traced to the growing concerns about the quality of public services, their costs, and the continuing need to make public sector institutions more accountable to the general public. The increased interest in the topic in the research and practice communities can be linked, in part, to the growing awareness that it is useful to think about organizational effectiveness as the very center of conceptualizations of the nature of organizations; and further, that it is the ultimate dependent variable in research on organizations (Cameron and Whetten, 1983; Madaus, etc. al., 1980).

Evidence of the growing interest in the topic can be found in Cameron and Whetten's 1983 estimate that during the preceding two decades a minimum of seven major works have been published on the subject and several hundred articles and book chapters were written in that period (p. 1). The number of case studies with an organizational effectiveness focus completed in recent years would clearly increase their estimates ten-fold.

Public education has not escaped the new wave of interest in the topic. It could even be argued that the current examinations of the effectiveness, efficiency, and quality of education are more intense than that of other public sector organizations in both absolute terms and in a relative sense. The several hundred reports produced by state commissions alone during the first part of the decade stands as evidence of this widespread concern about the effectiveness of public education.

The organizational effectiveness of rural small school districts in particular is bearing the brunt of much of the renewed interest in the quality of public education. Rural schools have long been regarded by many as inferior to their counterparts in other settings. Advocates of this assertion would seem to have gained support for their position in recent years as many rural districts have felt the pressures of new, potentially damaging demands on their programs and services caused by declining enrollments, state reform initiatives, and the depressed economic conditions facing agriculture and energy sectors of the economy.

Despite the popularity of the topic, most observers would agree with Cameron and Whetten's (1983) position that we are still without a meaningful definition of organizational effectiveness and, it follows, a theory of effectiveness (p. 1). These authors, who have produced what we regard to be one of the best "think pieces" on this complex topic, offer three explanations for the presence of multiple models of organizational effectiveness in the social sciences: they are products of multiple, arbitrary models of organizations; the construct space of organizational effectiveness is unknown; and, the best criteria for assessing organizational effectiveness are unknown (pp. 3-19).

In their seminal work, Cameron and Whetten offer two conclusions that have guided this design of organizational effectiveness studies for rural small school districts: (1) there cannot, at this time, be one universal model of organizational effectiveness (because there is not a universal theory of organizations); (2) it is more worthwhile to develop frameworks for assessing effectiveness than to try to develop theories of such. (Focusing on a limited set of criteria is the only way to resolve definitional and assessment problems. Measuring the constructs will generally lead to a better understanding of the constructs pp. 262-269.)

In arguing that the engineering of effectiveness studies is more productive than theorizing about effectiveness, Cameron and Whetten offer this useful reminder:

> In this regard, organizational effectiveness is no different from other complex constructs in the social sciences. Constructs such as intelligence, motivation, or leadership--whose construct space, by definition, also is not bounded--have been better understood as limited aspects of their total meaning have been measured. For example, a variety of approaches to motivation have been developed, each limited to a specific domain of the construct. Approaches relating to the satisfaction of needs. . .to increasing expectancies. . .to reinforcements. . .to task design. . .and so on, have each been pursued in research. These different approaches are not designed to replace one another, but to augment one another; and by pursuing these multiple models of motivation, the construct is understood to a greater degree (p. 267).

Cameron and Whetten further assert:

> In assessing organizational effectiveness, a similar attack seems appropriate, that is, to concentrate on measuring limited domains of the construct. This requires making informed choices about what criteria to include and what aspect of the organizational effectiveness construct space to focus on. . .formulating what to measure, how to measure, when to measure, and other practical (or engineering) concerns should receive first priority. These formulations should not be done haphazardly or thoughtlessly, however (pp. 267-268).

RECOMMENDED DESIGN FOR CONDUCTING EFFECTIVENESS STUDIES

This design for assessing the organizational effectiveness of rural, small school districts consists of five major, mostly sequential, steps:

ONE: Consider a large number of complex policy and technical issues associated with organizational effectiveness efforts.

TWO: Decide on the important, but largely straight-forward, technical issue of how best to think about the various subsystems or component parts of a rural small district for which measures of quality are to be developed.

THREE: Develop a consensus concerning what is to constitute measures of quality for each of the agreed upon subsystems.

FOUR: Reach agreement on the translation of the measures of quality into operational standards for each of the subsystems that reflect the contextual realities of a rural small district.

FIVE: Establish the presence or absence of a standard.

Reaching agreement on the important but largely technical issue in Step Two should not prove to be difficult, nor should the final step--the establishment of the presence or absence of a standard. Considerable debate, however, is likely to surround the other three steps in the approach proposed here. But, this is one of the strengths of the design because it is through reasoned discussion that the competing interests of all principal stakeholders (the local governing board, staff, community, and the state) can be established, differing interests resolved, and the necessary concensus developed.

STEP ONE: CONSIDERATION OF MAJOR POLICY AND TECHNICAL ISSUES

As suggested previously, a large number of definitional, conceptual, and methodological issues surround organizational effectiveness inquires. Thirteen of these that we regard to be central are cited in question form in Table One. Also, a number of options are established that should usually be considered for each one.

These policy and technical issues are interrelated. However, it should be stressed that no choice of option is inherently "right" or "wrong." It is also emphasized that the choice of an option for a particular issue must be internally consistent with choices made for other related issues. Failure to heed this caution can damage the intent of the exercise, perhaps irreversibly.

The themes of the thirteen issues were greatly influenced by Cameron and Whetten (1983) as well as Brownas (1974), Hatry (1974), and Balk (1985), whose work we found to be particularly useful in shaping our perspective.

TABLE 1
STEP ONE
MAJOR POLICY AND TECHNICAL ISSUES
TO BE CONSIDERED

Policies and Technical Issues and Major Options

1. What is to be the theoretical approach used in the assessment? Major options include: a goal model approach, a systems resource model approach, and an integrated model approach.

2. What is to be the purpose of the assessment? Major options include: summative evaluation, formative evaluation, and a combination of these.

3. From whose perspective/interest is organizational effectiveness to be judged? Major options include: rural district board and staff, the public, the state education agency, and a combination or all of these.

4. On what aspect(s) of the rural district's service delivery system is/are the assessment(s) to be made? Major options include: constituencies served, technologies employed, service provided, and a combination or all of these.

5. What organizational level(s) is/are to be the focus of the assessment? Major options include: individual level, sub-unit level, organizational level, and a combination or all of these.

6. What time frame(s) is/are to be used in the assessment? Major options include: short-term (two years or less), intermediate term (three to five years), long-term (five to ten years), and a combination or all of these.

7. From what source(s) is/are standards to be derived on which effectiveness is to be judged? Major options include: local standards, state standards, regional accreditation standards, the research literature, and a combination or all of these.

8. Who is to be responsible for the development of the standards? Major options include: rural district board and staff, constituent groups, state legislature or judicial branch, state education agency, professional associations, a dominant coalition and a combination or all of these.

9. What type of data are to be used in the assessment? Major options include: quantitative data, qualitative data, and a combination of these.

10. What are to be the source(s) of the data? Major options include: internally derived, externally derived, and a combination of these.

11. What criteria are to be used in the selection of effectiveness measures and in data collection procedures? Major options include: appropriateness, validity, reliability, availability, accessibility, cost usefulness, and a combination or all of these.

12. Whose responsibility is it to measure the effectiveness of a rural district? Major options include: rural district board and staff, the public, the state education agency, and a combination or all of these.

13. What use(s) is/are to be made of the results of the assessment? Major options include: rural district internal use, use by the public, state education use, and a combination or all of these.

STEP TWO: REACHING AGREEMENT ON HOW BEST TO THINK ABOUT THE VARIOUS SUBSYSTEMS ON PARTS OF THE ORGANIZATION

The second step of the design is the important one of deciding how best to think about the various subsystems or parts of the organization that will best explain how the functions of a rural small school district are performed. The assumption made here is that most organizations, including educational ones, have some conceptual plan that drives the way they conduct their work in order to achieve their mission with efficiency and effectiveness. Understanding what this conceptual plan is and how the organization has structured itself to achieve its goals is an essential prerequisite to an analysis of the organization.

There are many ways to view the various subsystems or parts of a typical school system. For example, one could view how schools function by stressing how educational enterprises differ from other organizations. Four popular conceptualizations of this type are: (1) the perspective of schools as professional bureaucracies which is advanced by many contemporary writers, (2) Carlson's (1964) notion of the school as a domesticated organization, (3) the view of the school as an organized anarchy championed by Cohen and March (1974), and (4) Weich's (1976) perspective of the school as a loosely coupled system. (Gareth Morgan's [1986] work on the use of different metaphors as an aid to understanding the complexity of organizational life and organizational analysis promises to add further to the richness of the conceptualizations of how organizations work.)

A more conventional perspective is that a rural school district, like other types of school districts, has a number of basic, near universal organizational-structural characteristics. In addition, it makes use of a number of processes through which the work of the organization is conducted.

The organizational-structural characteristics commonly considered, and which will be used later to illustrate several other features of this design, are:

- governance subsystem
- management subsystem
- instructional program subsystem
- instructional support services subsystem
- client subsystem
- staffing subsystem
- financial subsystem
- facilities and equipment subsystem

One of the most conventional, but still useful, perspectives of the major processes used in organizations to carry out the desired functions in each of the eight subsystems holds that most decision making is one of four types:

- planning decisions - relate to the establishment of a detailed plan for creating, maintaining, or improving a program or activity.
- organizing decisions - relate to the assignment of appropriate authority and responsibility.
- directing decisions - relate to the successful motivation of people.
- controlling decisions - relate to the timely identification and correction of discrepencies between the plan and actual performance.

STEP THREE: REACHING AGREEMENT ON WHAT CONSTITUTES MEASURES OF QUALITY

This step is one of the most difficult and complex tasks confronting the policy and profession communities. This is largely because the measure of quality (No sharp distinction between effectiveness and quality is being made here, even though the two terms could have different meanings depending upon their use in different contexts.) of a rural school district is dependent on the theoretical approach being used, the purpose of the assessment, the perspective from which effectiveness is being judged, and other important issues and value judgements that must be made.

While this step is complex, it is one of the most critical in any meaningful effort to judge the organizational effectiveness of a rural small school district, or for any type of organization. The inclusion of this design step prior to the development of specific standards for each of the subsystems (Step Four) will go far in assuring that the standards used include more than the narrow indicators currently being advocated by many. Also, it will address the legitimate concerns of those critics of the initial round of school reform who contend that the use of efficiency indicators only, or product-oriented indicators only, will not result in sustained improvement in the quality of education.

But what criteria should be used to establish measures of quality for assessing the organizational effectiveness of a rural small school district? It is possible to circumscribe a set of criteria that will enlarge the relevant indicators of organizational effectiveness, avoid the endless pursuit of an unattainable goal, and prevent a debate for which there is no solution? There is a way to begin this process and Dunn's work (1981) has utility for our task here.

Dunn argues for the use of six types of criteria as a way to establish the "explicitly stated values that underlie recommendations for actions" (p. 232). These are:

- Effectiveness: Does the activity result in the achievement of a valued outcome?
- Efficiency: Does the activity achieve the greatest effectiveness at least cost?
- Adequacy: Does the activity, given the level of effectiveness, satisfy the needs, values, or opportunities that gave rise to a problem?
- Equity: Does the activity result in effects or efforts that are fairly or justly distributed?
- Responsiveness: Does the activity satisfy the needs, preferences, or values of the intended groups?

- Appropriateness: Are the objectives and underlying assumptions of the measures tenable for this rural school district? (pp. 232-239)

This design forces concentration on which criteria are to be used in establishing measures of quality. Consideration of all six is critical.

The use of effectiveness criteria forces consideration of technical rationality in the establishment of standards. The use of efficiency criteria would result in the use of economic rationality. The inclusion of equity criteria that would assure legal and social rationality is not ignored. The use of responsiveness criteria forces consideration of the values of the contituency of the rural school district. Finally, as Dunn points outs, appropriateness refers to "the value of worth of a program's objectives and to the tenability of assumptions underlying these objectives (p. 238)."

In this design, the six criteria would be applied to each of the eight subsystems or component parts of a rural small school district (or whatever conceptualization is judged to be useful). This can be illustrated through the use of a matrix, as shown in Table Two.

TABLE 2

WORKSHEET ILLUSTRATING APPLICATION OF CRITERIA
FOR ESTABLISHING MEASURES OF QUALITY

Criteria	Subsystem							
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Effectiveness								
Efficiency								
Adequacy								
Equity								
Responsiveness								
Appropriateness								

Key

A. Governance, B. Management, C. Instructional Program, D. Instructional Support Services, E. Client, F. Staffing, G. Financial, H. Facilities and Equipment

The use of these six criteria for establishing measures of quality to judge the organizational effectiveness of rural small school districts will substantially improve the likelihood that the standards to be developed in the next step of this design are meaningful and defensable. This is a time consuming and difficult task which may explain why many current efforts appear to ignore important design issues, or tend to give prominence to tachnical, economic, or legal rationality to the exclusion of all other bases that should be considered in the development of good public policy.

STEP FOUR: REACHING AGREEMENT ON THE TRANSLATION OF MEASURES OF QUALITY INTO STANDARDS

The fourth step in this design is also critical to the success of the endeavor. The objective here is the translation of the measure of quality (the focus of the preceding step) into operational standards for each of the eight subsyster that reflect the contextual realities of a rural small school district.

There is no dearth of potentially meaningful standards for which measures of quality should be applied. Some of the most popular context indicators center on student-school and school-community characteristics. Prominent input indicators include fiscal and other resource characteristics, instructional supports and services, instructional policies, and work force characteristics. Process indicators commanding attention relate to leadership and organization characteristics and school climate. Student outcomes or product indicators continue to center on achievement, participation, and post-secondary schooling and employment characteristics. Frequently used examples of specific indicators in each of these broad categories are provided in Table Three. The illustrations cited are drawn from the indicators currently under consideration by the Maryland Governor's Commission on School Performance.

The real challenge in this step is to assure that the indicators reflect the contextual realities of a rural small school district. This will ordinarily require adjustments in many of the indicators--adjustments that acknowledge the demonstrable differences between education in a rural small school district and that which occurs in an urban or suburban district.

What is the nature of these differences? Two of the more obvious relate to the reduced scale operation of many rural small districts and their isolation. Consideration of the smaller enrollments of rural schools, a factor that is beyond the control of the school, requires that adjustments be

made in the use of any proposed input indicators that focus on expenditure patterns of the district. Similarly, adjustments in any proposed process indicators that focus on school use of community resources to enrich the instructional program would be required to acknowledge the absence, in more isolated areas, of many of the conventional opportunities of this type. The use of context and process variables reflect the work of Stufflebeam (1971).

TABLE 3
ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES OF COMMONLY
USED INDICATORS OF QUALITY

Category	Illustrative Examples
Context Variables	
Student/school characteristics	Mobility, non- or limited English proficient, economically and educationally disadvantaged, handicapped, educational level
School/community characteristics	Income level, unemployment rate, teen birth rate
Inputs Variables	
Fiscal and other resources	Financial support, financial capacity, expenditure patterns, financial effort, staffing patterns
Instructional supports and services	Staff development program, technology available, information management system, pupil personnel services, school psychological/pupil personnel/health services
Instructional policy	Time, program availability, course offerings, graduation requirements
Work force	Educational background, certification, experience, salary and benefits, assignment, performance appraisal, attendance, staff turnover
Process Variable	
Leadership and organization	School goals and mission, opportunity for input, monitoring system, recognition and reward system
Curriculum and instruction	System for evaluation of student progress, goal-oriented curriculum, defined curriculum, maximized learning time
Climate	Parental and community involvement, academic emphasis, safe and orderly environment
Product Variables	
Achievement	Student performance
Participation	Course and program enrollment, dropout rate, attendance rate
Post secondary	Enrollment in post secondary, military, employment

Once one moves beyond the more obvious adjustments of the type illustrated here, the task becomes infinitely more difficult. However, it is essential that the contextual realities of a rural small district be reflected in the development of standards. Complicating the task further is the fact that the contextual realities of rural districts themselves probably differ as much, if not more, than the differences between rural and urban, and rural and suburban districts. What is being argued here is an extension of the powerful thesis advanced by Tyack (1974), Sher (1976), Nachtigal (1982), DeYoung (1986), and others who have cautioned against the continuation of the "one best way mentality" that seems to have driven education policy in the nation for much of recent history to the detriment of rural schools. The authors deliberately extend this caution to the design of organizational effectiveness studies.

An illustration of how one of the potential criteria available for use in translating measures of quality into operational standards is provided in Table Four. In this example, the criterion responsiveness is used.

TABLE 4

AN ILLUSTRATION OF OPERATIONAL STANDARDS
FOR THE CRITERION OF RESPONSIVENESS

Subsystem	Example
Governance	Opportunities exist for involving the public in decision making so that their interests are represented.
Management	Opportunities exist for participatory decision making at all levels of the organization.
Instructional Program	Opportunities for addressing the educational needs of all handicapped children are provided.
Instructional Support Services	Use is made of volunteers and other community resources to enrich the instructional program.
Client	Use is made of management information system technologies to secure the views of the various constituencies that make up the client subsystem.
Staffing	Professional development opportunities exist that address the needs of the individual school and the school district.
Financial	Decisions concerning resource allocations are consistent with the educational priorities of the individual school and the school district.
Facilities and Equipment	Opportunities exist for the appropriate use of school district facilities by community groups.

STEP FIVE: ESTABLISHING THE PRESENCE OR ABSENCE OF A STANDARD

The culminating step of this design is straightforward; the presence or absence of a standard is determined. The decision of what organization should conduct this assessment was made in Step One. Issue 12 (Table One) posed the question of responsibility for measuring the effectiveness of a rural district--the rural district board and staff, the public, the state education agency, a combination or all of the above.

SUMMARY

Interest in organizational effectiveness is likely to continue to accelerate in the years ahead. The effectiveness of rural districts in particular will be continuously questioned. This design forces the initial consideration of, and the reaching of a concensus for, a number of major policy and technical issues that should guide the effort and give it an internal coherence frequently lacking in effectiveness exercises. The design also requires that those who have responsibility for planning a study identify the criteria that are to be used in establishing measures of quality prior to the selection of indicators of quality. This important prerequisite to good effectiveness studies appears to be often neglected. Another important feature of the design is the requirement that agreement be reached on the contextual realities of a rural district and that these be reflected in the indicators of quality.

It is our hope that this design will lead to the initiation of a number of integrated and cumulative assessments of the effectiveness of rural small school districts that will ultimately allow the circumscribing of the best criteria to use in shaping public policy decisions on this critical issue.

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